

## Directions:

1. Demonstrate evidence of close reading.
2. Highlight your confusion.
3. Answer the two questions at the bottom of the page.
4. Write a 1+ page reflection in your WN.

## A Letter To My Generation: Ask Not What You Can Do For Barack Obama, Ask What Barack Obama Can Do For You

Dear Young Americans:

I won't tell you how special you are because you've heard it before. For the past nine months, the mainstream media have showered you with adulation. Before the Iowa caucuses, [Barack Obama's](#) campaign said you'd be his secret weapon, showing up for him like you'd never shown up for a presidential candidate before. Reporters didn't believe it; they'd seen that MTV special before, heard about the hidden youth vote and knew it never panned out

But you proved them wrong; you did pan out. You surprised the media, and the media like nothing more than a surprise. Since then it's been a nonstop lovefest—your reputation is secure as the most idealistic and engaged group of young people since the '60s, an optimistic lot who believe that Obama really is different from all the rest. You've made his rallies into cultural events, his candidacy into a movement. You've done what no one thought was possible: you've made politics seem cool again.

So I don't have to tell you how special you are—which is good, because I don't think you're particularly special. Then again, I'm one of you, so I wouldn't. Born in 1981, I am part of a generation that is accustomed to being coddled and cheered and championed, even when we haven't done much at all. It started in the cradle when our baby-boomer parents gazed into our innocent faces and saw perfect, wondrous reflections of their perfect, wondrous selves. It continued as soccer coaches and ballet teachers turned into SAT tutors and career counselors—people whose job was to make sure the world understood just how wonderful we were. The Internet sealed our fate. Our parents and grandparents, enthralled and a little terrified by the transformative power of technology, watched as we neatly picked up our lives and moved them into HTML. We learned to expect applause for simply showing up.

And really, if we're honest, that's all you've done this year—show up. You voted (umm ... you're supposed to vote). You didn't get hung up on a candidate's race (umm ... you're not supposed to care about race). Your one lasting gift to political posterity this year: the text message. Greatest Generation, watch your back.

All this would be fine with me—who doesn't like praise?—if it weren't for the sneaking suspicion that for all your earnestness and self-congratulation, you haven't done enough. True, Obama may well win the White House about a month from now. If he does, after African-Americans, people our age will deserve the largest share of credit for putting him there. But despite all the enthusiasm for Obama, you, his young supporters, have done little to ensure he'll be the kind of transformative leader you long for. Your biggest failure: you've hardly asked Obama for a thing.

No doubt, this failure makes you look virtuous—you are above the politics of personal interest. But no generation of young people, except maybe the radicalized '60s youth, has ever organized as an interest group. The problem is, on his long road to the White House, Obama has met plenty of groups who do want something from him. He has encountered senior citizens who worry about what he'll do to their Social Security checks, union members who worry he'll trade away their jobs and small businessmen who worry he'll tax them into oblivion. These people are

not as enamored of him as you are and have made it clear that he has to work for their vote. He's taken their challenge, making promises to each of these old interest groups that, in the White House, he'll look out for them.

Chances are, if he makes it there, he will. From the moment he takes his hand off the Bible on Inauguration Day, a President Obama will want the same thing as any first-term president: a second term. The metric by which the country will judge his worthiness for this prize is: did he get something done? So Obama, a cool rationalist at heart, will work diligently to produce a reform agenda. The easiest way to do that? Working with the Democratic majorities in both houses of Congress he is almost certain to have.

Here's where the trouble for young people starts. Those Democratic majorities don't owe it all to you. They owe just as much to the groups that have traditionally put Democrats into Congress: the old coalition of labor unions, urban affluents and minorities. Their agenda will be tailored to the short-term concerns of those interest groups, not the long-term benefit of the young. That's a shame because what's in young people's interest—a sound fiscal policy, a solution to the entitlement crisis, a robust approach to global trade and a realistic plan to address climate change—also happens, by definition, to be in the nation's long-term interest.

Get selfish before it's too late. The financial crisis is horrible news for everyone—rich and poor, young and old. But the fact that it coincides with the presidential debates—the last gasp of substance in the campaign—provides a unique opportunity for you to ask Obama to choose you. With the new fiscal reality, neither he nor John McCain should get away with promising everyone what he or she wants. In debates they will be pressed to explain their priorities. Seize this opportunity. To get the best of Obama, young people, cut out the blind devotion. Get off the Huffington Post. Stop the Facebook blasts. If you really want to be the change you've been waiting for, start holding Obama to some of his promises to our generation. In these waning days of the campaign, ask not what you can do for Barack Obama, ask what Barack Obama can do for you.

Of course, asking is easier said than done. What exactly should you ask Obama for?

The most predictable request, and a suitable one for our earnest generation, is for Obama to do something about the entitlement crisis. Many of you know how Armageddon is coming through simple math: the retirement of the baby-boom generation means the Social Security system will have to pay out more in benefits for retired workers than it is taking in from those still in the workforce. Politicians have long paid lip service to the coming crisis (Al Gore's "lockbox," President Bush's "ownership society"), but to date, none of them has achieved a solution. Under an Obama presidency, the crisis will be on our doorstep.

In the early stages of his campaign, Obama seemed genuinely interested in addressing this problem, proposing to cover the Social Security shortfall by raising the payroll tax on high earners. In recent weeks, though, his advisers have significantly scaled back this proposal. The momentum of the modern presidency suggests that the appropriate time for a president to dare to touch the "third rail," the first year of a second administration, may be many political lifetimes away for either Obama or McCain.

The new financial crisis, however, presents a Democratic president with a unique opportunity on entitlements. Historically, Republicans have started any conversation about Social Security with a demand for partial privatization of the program. The failure of President Bush's Social Security plan, however, combined with volatility in the markets, may well lead many Republicans to conclude they cannot sell privatization politically. A concerted effort by Obama to attract attention to the problem could force Republicans to find new solutions—say, through means testing or raising the retirement age.

More immediate: ask Obama to level with our generation about the national debt. In September the Congressional Budget Office estimated that the next president will inherit a deficit of \$500 billion—a record number that does not include the cost of a bailout of Wall Street. To be clear, this is debt that will be paid by our generation. Servicing the deficit will be harder for us than it was for our parents since our creditors in the world at large have less confidence in the fundamentals of our economy and our ability to pay off our debts in the long run.

Obama's economic advisers have said they are convinced that, even in light of the current financial crisis, they can address the deficit and grow the economy all while keeping the tax burden off the middle class. Many of these advisers are veterans of the Clinton administration and thus have credibility when they make such a promise. But they have no such credibility in promising they can do all these things while investing in our future. During the past 30 years, neither party has any record of spending money, outside of defense, with benefits that accrued primarily to future generations. Rather, under Reagan, both Bushes and Clinton, the government's largesse, in times of deficit and times of surplus, was used to subsidize current consumption. Here, more than anywhere, is where government has failed to deliver for our generation. It has not been a question of ideology or a question of how to do the math. It is simply a moral failure. Now is the time to ask Obama to treat you more honorably than presidents who came before.

This will no doubt prove an uncomfortable request for some of you, who know nothing kills a Democratic candidate like honest talk about taxes. Perhaps, then, you will make an arguably less dangerous, but certainly no less dramatic, request: make the case for global trade. Those of us blessed with many years ahead of us will see China, India, Brazil and Russia equal (or better) America's economic strength. Our survival in this new world will depend on our ability to be a nimble player in the global marketplace. Through nudges and winks from Obama's friends and advisers, one gets the sense that the candidate understands this reality. But during the course of the campaign, his language on trade has devolved into protectionist Democratic boilerplate. Is it too much to expect Obama to acknowledge the global reality of the future?

Perhaps most important, ask Obama to level with the nation about what seriously addressing climate change will require. Clearly the candidate's heart is in the right place; he and the Democratic leadership have said global warming will be a top priority. A realistic policy solution on carbon emissions, however, will require the next president to pull off three masterful feats: a public-information campaign to create political support, a grand congressional bargain and a muscular global agreement that includes emerging powers. Obama has not spent this campaign preparing the electorate for the notion that this problem will require a major sacrifice to cover the transitional costs of a new energy economy. He could help himself by admitting that a viable fix requires more than just biofuels, green-collar jobs and Al Gore.

I do not mean to suggest that asking questions of Obama will help him get elected. Some of them will probably hurt his chances. An Obama defeat is an outcome many of you cannot fathom and most of you would like to avoid. But if our generation fails to hold Obama to a higher standard in the final weeks of this campaign, it will most likely get what it deserves: a decidedly ordinary President Obama and a new generation's descent into cynicism. This would be a tragedy, for, in truth, there is one thing that makes our generation special. We still have the power to believe.

*Source: Jonathon Darman, Newsweek, 9/28/08*

1. What is the author's purpose?
2. Who is the intended audience?
3. List three strategies the writer uses to try to achieve his purpose: